

POP THE BUBBLE

AN EXCHANGE STUDENT AT BOSTON COLLEGE: FIRST IMPRESSIONS

BY CELINE SCHOEN

In July 2010, an official and cordial e-mail assured me that I was accepted as a student in a political school in my country, France. The deal was clear: two years of studies there, followed by one year abroad, and finally two more years in France.

On paper it seemed simple enough. The meaning of “being an exchange student” was, at that time, still an abstraction. We all knew that we would have to leave Strasbourg for one year, but the time of departure still seemed far away. Today, abstraction has turned into reality, and that time when we pondered over the meaning of “studying abroad” now seems long past.

Boston, or “*Bahstun*” when I try to get rid of my French accent, was my destination. My first contact with the city was Logan airport. After a cab trip to Newton, I met a retired couple who managed a charming B&B and were waiting for me (and my four suitcases). Jet lag. Sleep. I dedicated my first days here to vital necessities: Bank of America, T-Mobile, Starbucks, housing. I visited the apartment I had chosen on the Internet, while I was still in France, to make sure that the pictures I was shown were not photomontages of a place full of bugs. I luckily had no nasty surprises and was ready to enjoy Boston as a pure tourist.

Strolling around the streets of the Hub, walking the Freedom Trail, and taking a ferry to Charlestown were all great occasions to get to know the city. Boston is such a charming, historic, cultural, and pleasant town, which really requires that time be spent in its streets, gardens, museums, and shopping centers. I learned that: the Museum of Fine Arts is free every Wednesday after 4pm; the best hot chocolate of the United States is offered at Harvard Square; yummy Dunkin Donuts gives you a donut each time you buy a medium drink; on West Street, a fantastic bookstore sells great novels for only 1 or 2 dollars; and in Norman B. Leventhal Park pillows and books are available to relax with on the grass.

I have also spent a lot of time in the various Bostonian museums, trying to understand what Isabella Steward Gardner’s aim was when she bought so much artwork (unless it was simply to show how wealthy she was). I thought about what the tea, which dates from the Boston Tea Party and is currently kept in the Old State House, would taste like if someone drank it today. I spent time looking for a painting by the talented Andy Warhol all around the city without being able to find one, and losing my wallet in Paul Revere’s house in the North End. It also took me a long time before I discovered that the word I had heard on a guided tour of the USS Constitution was actually “cannon ball” not “cannibal.”

One day, I thought I had found Hogwarts. I was wondering where Harry and his friends were when I suddenly realized it was Boston College. My French school, which was composed

of only one building (no restaurants, green lawns, or amazing stadium), suddenly seemed to be a gloomy doll's house where people only go to class. In France, I could not eat, relax, exercise, or hang out on campus, or in other words do all the pleasant things that are feasible at BC. The sole experience of being a student on an American campus, like one of those we have seen in movies for years, is an extraordinary privilege. It's the chance of a lifetime to discover other cultures, and an undeniable way of getting out of the everyday routine.

Time for orientation finally came: three intense days of discoveries and meetings were about to begin. Everything was new: friends, teachers, school, and language. Very soon I realized that education in the United States was really different than in France. I would have never even thought of calling one of my teachers by his or her first name! The American system seems more informal, and as a result less strict. A simple but revealing example is that eating is allowed in class, whereas in France even the most relaxed teacher will not allow you to enter the classroom with a cup of coffee in your hand.

But all of those impressions were before really getting to know Boston College. Before distressingly going up the Million Dollar Stairs every morning. Before having experienced Hillside, Lower, the Rat, and Mac. Before having heard of Baldwin, Beanpot, or X-Fit. Before spending nights in the Mods or on Coro. In other words, before being part of the BC bubble and forgetting that Boston is greater than the Cleveland Circle area. There are dozens of things to do at BC, but just pop the bubble and you'll find tons more in Boston.

